

## Tantra practice within Sakta worship

Monidipa Bose Dey

Columnist | Independent Research Scholar

Email: [monidipadey@gmail.com](mailto:monidipadey@gmail.com); [monidipadey@rocketmail.com](mailto:monidipadey@rocketmail.com)

### Abstract

Tantric ritualism within Mother goddess worship in the current form as we see now developed to a large extent sometime before 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. However, there are reasons to believe that Tantricism in primitive form was present in early human civilization, and was a means to invoke the regenerative powers in nature, hence closely associated with Mother Goddess worship. There are traces of Tantric rituals in the archaeological materials found from the Harappan culture. Later Vedic literature too mentions fertility rites associated with agriculture, a form of worship that continues even today. This paper will explore Tantricism as it developed within the Mother Goddess worship, and the basic principles that form to be an essential part of Tantric-Sakti worship, through a study of the available religious and other literature.

**Keywords:** Sakta, Mother Goddess, Matrika, Tantra, fertility, Ritualism

### Introduction

In the commentary of *ManuSmriti II*, Kullukabhatta had categorized ancient traditional knowledge into two parts: Vedic and Tantra. Parallel to the Veda, Tantra was also a means to understand the unknown aspects of life and universe, thus summarily a study and comprehension of nature. In the early stages of compilation, Tantra thus was a vast collection of human knowledge of the world around. Unlike the Vedas that dealt with philosophies focused on realizing the Absolute or the Supreme Consciousness, Tantra dealt with knowledge of the objective world and day-to-day activities, such as agriculture, alchemy, medicine, metallurgy, embryology, cattle breeding, and other scientific techniques. Tantra started with the belief that macrocosm and microcosm are same, and the clue to understanding the world around is located within the body.

Tantra, thus in early stages had started as a branch of pure empirical and scientific knowledge. Later when it was made a part of the religious system, one branch of it became a part of the ancient Mother goddess/Matrika worship, and acquired a unique feature, wherein womanhood was elevated to the highest standards possible and worshipped, which became known as the Sakti puja. In Tantrism, Sakti is viewed as the manifestation of the Feminine Principle, and it is believed that when women are treated with respect and bhakti, they elevate men to the level of divinity. As per the *Devibhagavata*, women as manifestations of the great Adi Sakti, should be honored and venerated, and anyone who offends them would face the wrath of Prakriti (nature), the Universal Mother; and the one who appeases them is actually offering worship to Prakriti herself (Kumar, 1974). *Paranandasutra* says that woman being Sakti is the Brahman, or the Supreme Consciousness, and must be worshipped with food, clothes, and jewellery, and not be offended. Many Tantric texts carry the verse ‘*striyo devah striyah pranah striya eva hi bhusanam*’ meaning a woman as the manifestation

of Sakti is God, the very pranah or life-giving breath, and the most precious of all living beings. *Kularnavatantra* heaps great praise on womanhood and says that every woman is born in the kula of the Mother; hence should be treated with respect. From these texts it is quite evident that while in modern times Tantra appears to be male dominant, it was not always so. As R.G. Bhandarkar speaks on Tantrism,

*“The ambition of every follower of the system is to become identical with Tripurasundari, and one of his religious exercises is to habituate himself to think that God is a woman. Thus, the followers of Sakti school of thought justify their appellation to the belief that God is a woman and it ought to be the aim of all to become a woman”* (1936, p. 208).

*Acarabhedatantra* stipulates that women must be worshipped with *panchatattva*, which includes Khapuspa (menstrual blood), and Para Sakti would be worshipped by the Vamachara (vama here meaning woman, and not the left direction) followers only by turning into a woman. In *Devibhagavata* it is said that Brahman, Vishnu, and Shiva could see Devi in her highest form only after transforming themselves into women. These sex transformations are directly linked with the popular custom of priests wearing female robes while conducting Devi puja. In Tantrism female priests or women shamans called Bhairavis and Yoginis are still seen as important part of the worship (Rawson, 1973). The seven lotuses or padmas on the susumna cord are the seven seats of femininity that is taken to be present in all human beings; and Saktis such as Lakini, Varuni, Kulakundalini, etc, that are found in these lotuses are also seen as females (ibid). In the Vaishnava *Sahajiyaliterature* too, Radha is the Kulakundalini Sakti, or the Feminine Principle of the Vaishnavas.

As continuing from the fertility worship of Mother Goddesses of the prehistoric era, the Tantric form of worship also lays special importance to the menstrual blood, termed as Kha-pushpa, for the same reason. Here in comes the use of the color red/vermilion, which we see being used in almost all Indic religious traditions. The Bhil tribes before sowing their fields followed the traditions of setting up of a stone smeared with vermilion. Since vermilion or red color symbolizes the menstrual blood, the smearing of vermilion implies the passing of the energy of procreation to the earth and making it fertile. The Mohenjodaro Mother Goddesses mostly have a red slip or wash paint over them, as are the Venus figures of Willendorf (Austria). Briffault (1952) who connected the red color with menstrual blood and fertility further said that in many countries across the world it was an ancient custom for pregnant or menstruating women to color their bodies with red ochre in order to improve their chances of fertility and also to keep off men during those times. As Thomson (1949, pp. 209-10) writes,

*‘it is worldwide custom for menstruating or pregnant women to daub their bodies with red ochre, which serves at once to warn the men away and to enhance their fertility. In many marriage ceremonies the bride’s forehead is painted red...a sign that she is forbidden to all men save her husband and guarantee that she will bear him children...red is the renewal of life. That is*

*why bones from upper Paleolithic and neolithic interments are painted red. The symbolism becomes clear when we find...that the skeleton has been lain in contracted or uterine posture. Smearred with the color of life, curled up like a babe in the womb...what more could the primitive man do to ensure that the soul of the departed would be born again?'*

The same tradition is still seen in Hindu women who wear vermilion (sindoor) after marriage, signaling their bindings to one man and the readiness to procreate. For the same reason widows and unmarried girls cannot use sindoor, because they cannot procreate. Holi, which is also a ritual of fertility, originally showed the profusion of color red.

In Tantric form of worship, the focus remains on the rituals centering on the female genitals (*lata sadhana*), and the tantric yantras that symbolize female organs. During Durga puja a yantra known as *sarvatobhadramandala* symbolising the female procreation organs is drawn on the ground in the form of alpona. Then a purnaghata or a purnakumbha symbolizing the womb is placed on it and a sindurputtali or the figure of a baby is drawn on the ghata, and finally five leaves or amrapallava is placed on the ghata with a sindoor smeared coconut on top (Banerjea, 1966; Kramrisch, 1975). This is thus a simple fertility ritual that connects female regenerative powers of both humans and plants (human and natural fertility) to ensure continual procreation.

That the yantra and purnaaghata is associated with fertility is best depicted in the murti of a Mother Goddess found on the hilly slopes facing the river Krishna in Nagarjunakonda (Image 11). It depicts the lower part of a female figure in a sitting or squatting position with legs doubled up and set wide apart and the feet facing outwards. The bifurcated part prominently shows the vulva or the yonidvara, and the ornamented broad belt or girdle (mekhala) from below the naval creates a purna-ghata like imagery. *Satapatha Brahmana* equates a purnaghata with the mother goddess; while *Kathasaritasagar* is more detailed in its comparison of the purnaghata with that of a womb, and this would explain why the nine nights known as navratri during Durga puja, which takes during the month of aswin, begins with establishing a ghata, a ritual known as the ghata-sthapana, which is establishing a fertility vessel (symbolizing a womb).

From the above introduction it is clear that the later developed form of Tantrism within Matrika or Mother Goddess worship was directly associated with sexual and fertility rituals. The next part of the article will explore the basic principles that form the essence of Tantric worship rituals within Sakti puja.

## **Discussion**

### *Matrikas (Divine Mothers), Dakinis, and Yoginis in Tantrism*

Tantra worship with all its rituals that are of a specific nature and different from the Vedic ones, were later made a part of the major Hindu sects, such as Vaishnavism and Shaivism. However, in the context of Saktism, Tantric worship acquired special significance. There are no doubts that in the

historical period as Tantra developed within Sakti worship, the element of fear was one of the primary human emotions that got associated with Tantric rituals (Banerjea, 1966). In an inscription dated 423-24 CE found at Gangadhar in Malwa (Madhya Pradesh), among other things there is a record of a minister of Raja Visvavarman (his son Bandhuvarman was a feudatory ruler of the Guptas), named Mayurakshaka, who had built 'a terrible abode... full of female ghouls of the Divine Mothers, who utter loud and tremendous shouts in joy; and who stir up the oceans with the mighty winds rising from the magic rites of their religion.' This translation by Fleet (1888, pp 76-78) misses out some of the essential essence of the original inscription that says, 'Matrinanchapramuditaghanatyartha-nihradininam tantrabhutaprabala-pavanodvarttit-ambhonidhinam... (next portion broken off)... gatamidam dakini-samprakirnam vesmatyugram nripatisachivo'karayat punyahetoh.' Fleet had translated dakini as 'female ghouls' and Tantra as 'magic rites.' The word *vesmatyugram* also needs a mention, as it signifies that the abode (temple) of the Divine Mothers could not be a terrible one, as Fleet suggests in his translation; in fact, the word 'terrible' is in reference to the nature of the rites practiced by the followers of Tantra worship. Thus, one thing is clear from this inscription; the element of fear is associated with Tantrism within Matrika worship, where Dakinis play an important role.

The names of Dakinis, and other associates of the Devi known as Sakinis and Lakinis, are found in Tantric texts (eg. *Kubjikamata Tantra*), Puranas (*Shiva Purana*, *Agni Purana*), and other texts, such as *Lalitopakhyaana*. In some later texts, Dakinis are shown as associates of Devi Kali (*Dakini Kaliganavishesah*). There are few theories on the origin of the word Dakini, of which one says these deities were brought from Tibet and incorporated into Tantrism (Bagchi, 1931); a line of thought endorsed by Dasgupta (1960), who opined that the word 'Dakini' was derived from 'daka,' a Tibetan word, meaning a wise woman. However, these theories do not hold much ground owing to the presence of the early 5<sup>th</sup> century CE Malwa inscription that mentioned the word Dakini, which emphasised the loud shouts of the Divine Mothers and their associates, thus suggesting an Indian origin of the word (Banerjea, 1966). Here it is interesting to note that the words *ghosha* and *daka* have the same meaning, and when read in the context of the word *ghosini* as found in *Atharvaveda*, where it refers to the female attendants of Rudra, the Indian origin of the word *daka* becomes more relevant.

Another group of associates of the Devi in Tantric worship are the Yoginis; and they exist as part of Tantric Saktism from a fairly early period. The yoginis are prominent in Tantric worship from early medieval period, and as per some Sakta texts and the Puranas (*Agni Purana*) there are 64 Yoginis. *Agnipurana* mentions the presence of eight Matrikas (chapter 146, part 1), and each one of these Matrikas have their names prefixed with the name Chamunda, such as Chamunda- Brahmani, Chamunda-Indrani, etc. In the second part of chapter 146 there are the Ashtashtaka devis ( $8 \times 8 = 64$ ), who are a part of Devi Chamunda (*chamunda-kulasambhuta mandale pujita jaye* - v. 20), and are worshipped in mandalas, the well-known Tantric Yogini Mandala. The worship of the 64 yoginis in ashtashtaka yogini mandala is evident in the extant early medieval circular temples of the yoginis (rarely rectangular) that are seen across the country, such as the 64 yogini temples in Khajuraho, Bhedagat, Morena, Ranipur Jharial, and Hirapur. The arrangement and shape of these 64 yogini temples show the relevance of the term *mandalakramavidah*, as used by Varahamihira, while referring to the worshippers of the Matrikas.

### ***The Basic Principles of Tantric worship***

In the Tantric Sakta theology of the cosmogony, it was only the unmanifested Prakriti that existed prior to creation. In the Tantric and Sankhya principle of Pradhana or Prakriti, there is the theory of the all-powerful Feminine Principle. While Sankhya is essentially the theology of Prakriti, but it also

gives space to Purusha or the Male Principle, even though the space is secondary in position to the Female Principle. While in modern form of Tantra, the term Prakriti has acquired a more metaphysical form, originally the term referred to Mother Earth or the Bhu-(Lakshmi) Devi, who produced crops and other vegetation.

The main objective of the Sakta worshipper is to understand the universe within himself or herself, and to finally attain moksha by becoming one with the Devi. An important part in Sakta worship is getting proper *diksa* or initiation by a guru, without which all efforts to attain moksha will be futile. In Tantrism it is believed that proper *diksa* gives divine knowledge and destroys vices; and as per traditions, this knowledge as given by the guru must be kept secret. While any qualified person, irrespective of gender or caste, can be a guru in Tantric Saktism, the guru must be very careful while selecting disciples, and if necessary, wait for many years to get the right disciple to whom he can give *diksa*. *Saradatilaka* gives a detailed criteria for the right qualities necessary to become a guru, and the qualities necessary to be selected as a disciple. A true guru will have a calm mind, be authoritative and convincing, while possessing deep knowledge of the agamas and tantric scriptures. In Tantrism there are certain steps to attain moksha, and the aspiring sadhak/devotee must climb that spiritual staircase, and in order to do that he or she must follow three successive stages – *pasu* (animal), *vira* (heroic), and *divya* (divine). In the first stage or the *pasu*, the devotee can worship any god, but he or she must strictly follow the society set morality rules and codes. By adhering to the rules, the devotee then gets raised to the second level, which is the *vira*. In this level the devotee gets initiated into the *vamacara* and *siddhantacara*, and he/she needs *diksa* by a guru for proper guidance. At this level the devotee becomes free of social rules and taboos, and has to rid his/her mind of all social prejudices. The ritual of *pancamakara*, if performed correctly under the able guidance of a guru, elevates the devotee to the third level of *divya* or divine phase. At this level the devotee can be initiated into the *kaulacara*. The Kaula worshipper of Tantric Saktism is above any moral biases, and free from any worldly attachments.

*Acarabhedatantra* stipulates that women must be worshipped with *panchatattva*. This is an essential component of the second level or the *vira* phase of the spiritual ascendance in Tantric worship. *Panchatattva* or *panca-makara* is the use of five Ms, or *madya* (wine), *mamsa* (meat), *matysa* (fish), *mudra* (cereals) and *maithuna* (sexual rites). Fish, wine, and sexual rites are a part of fertility magic rituals associated with Mother Goddess worship, and are common across all ancient cultures across the world. Wine is a pre-condition for sexual rites, which is associated with fertility magic; while fish is seen as a fertility symbol (Briffault, 1952). Aphrodite, a fish goddess, was worshipped as a giver of animal and vegetation fruitfulness, and associated with women child bearing capability (ibid). Geometrical designs, similar to tantric diagrams, which represented the female genitals, were a common feature across all ancient societies and cultures, and were used as fertility symbols.

In ancient times people projected their own experiences from daily lives into the things around them and in their various ideas, which helped create a practical philosophy of life through the principle of analogy. Thus, nature's productivity and Mother Earth were viewed in terms of human reproduction and the human mother. For this reason, fertility magic rites associated with sexual union and female generative organs are a universal phenomenon seen across all ancient cultures; and this is continued as Tantra rituals within Sakta puja in Hinduism.

Along with Matrika worship, there is the phallic worship or *linga puja*, prevalent among the ancient cultures worldwide. At Mohenjo-daro excavations have yielded small models of *linga* and *yonis*, which were likely to have been used as life giving amulets. At Harappa there were found many conical *lingas*, which represented the male reproductive organ; while ring-stones representing the *yonis* were symbolic of the Female Principle or Mother Goddess. The tantric group worshipping the Sri Chakra, is also a representation of the female generative organ. Basically, the *linga* was a

representation of the act of cultivation, while *yoni* represented Mother Earth, and this is supported by Manu's lines (IX. 37) that says, '*iyam bhimirhi bhutanam sasvati yoniruccate.*' Later as religion evolved, the *yoni* and *linga* worship acquired metaphysical meanings and dualistic philosophical values were attached to them. Thus, it can be suggested that Tantric worship in primitive form can be traced back to the proto-historic Harappan culture of *yoni-linga puja*.

Another important ritual in Tantric worship is the practice of *savasadhana* or the corpse ritual. As per the *Kaulavalinirnaya* (XIV. 75-207), the worshipper on a specific new-moon night has to go to the *samsana* or some deserted place, and perform certain rituals on the dead body of a healthy person who has met an accidental death or who has died in a war. The dead body is washed and properly anointed, then prayers are offered to it, and *durge durge raksani svaha* is chanted; while the devotee shuts all deviations of his/her sensory organs and focuses the mind only on Devi's image. With complete inward focus on the Devi, the inner consciousness starts to function, and the devotee experiences different phases of the *savasadhana*. At the first phase the devotee will experience various temptations in the form of beautiful men/women, wealth, food, etc. If the devotee gives in to these temptations, all his/her efforts will be in vain and the *sadhana* fails, and it is believed that the aspirant *Sadhak* at this point may go mad. If the first phase is successfully passed, then in the second phase the devotee experiences various forms of fear. As the various other phases proceed, and the aspirant *sadhak* successfully passes them all, then the Devi appears to him in his *sadhana* in the form of a small girl to reward him, and the *sadhak* acquires mantra *siddha* powers. Some forms of *savasadhana* are still practiced at Tarapitha in West Bengal. A line of thought opines that this practice of *savasadhana* embodies the ancient belief that *Bhu Devi* or Mother Earth is also the guardian of the dead, wherein she is '*an underworld deity connected alike with the corpse and the seed-corn buried under the earth*' (Piggott, 1950, p. 127). Thus, tantric *savasadhana* is based on the ancient rites of fertility rituals that are connected with concepts of death and the renewal of life. Interestingly, the concepts of death and resurrection of life are also still seen in the rituals performed during the *charaka* and *gajana* festivals of West Bengal, where dead bodies are used for various rituals, which can be viewed as another form of the ancient death-corpse rites, similar to what we see in *savasadhana*.

## **Conclusion**

The theology of Tantra in Sakti worship is simple, despite the complex abstract and technical aspects of the rituals. It believes that all women are manifestations of *Prakriti* or *Sakti*, hence they must be viewed with respect, and offending a woman would raise the anger of the Devi. A *Sadhak* (male) looking for *moksha* through Tantra must comprehend the dormant Feminine Principle within himself, and he can worship the Devi only by becoming a female. The concept of *Shiva-Sakti* is an integral part of Tantric worship, where in Saktism the Male Principle (*Shiva* or *Purusha*) is the passive energy, which is essential to wake up the Female Principle in *Prakriti* or *Sakti* that is the active energy in the living world.

Tantric worship in Saktism has its origin in the prehistoric Mother Goddess rituals, symbolising the ways and facts of an ancient life that no longer exists physically. The development of Tantrism within Saktism was manifold, like a lot of water channels, some big, some small, but all issuing from one primitive source- *Matrika* worship, where women were seen as revered entities for their magical power to procreate and bring in new lives. From around 6th century CE the Sakta-Tantric form of worship started changing some of its primitive characters, and by 10<sup>th</sup> century CE it was woven into the Hindu religious system in the form that we see now. Even today Tantric worship is viewed as mysterious, a form of black magic; and the emotion of respect arising out of fear remains associated with it.

# INDIC HERITAGE AND CULTURE

*An International Open Access, Peer Reviewed Refereed, Yearly Multidisciplinary Journal*

ISSN (0): 2584-2862

Vol.-4, Issue-I, 2025

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